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PREFACE

One of the most serious problems faced by Africa today is the disruption of social order caused by civil wars and regional conflicts. The conflicts that have occurred since the 1990s are especially notable with regard to the large numbers of refugees and IDPs they have produced. Although the African continent has now captured the world's attention with regard to its plentiful natural resources and rapid economic growth, it continues to suffer from the scars of violence and conflict. It is essential to the stability and development of African societies to find effective means to ameliorate the varied problems caused by these conflicts.

Both governmental and non-governmental international bodies have intervened in these conflicts in various ways, such as through peace-keeping missions, supporting the establishment of post-war political institutions, and prosecuting violations of human rights and war crimes. These interventions, however, have achieved limited success because they are based on ideologies, values and processes that are fundamentally Western in origin.

In an attempt to address these difficulties, we developed a research project titled, "Comprehensive Area Studies on Coexistence and Conflict Resolution Realizing African Potentials." This is a 5-year project, initiated in 2011, funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research [S]). For details of the project, please visit the following website: <http://www.africapotential.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/>

This research emphasizes the knowledge, practices and institutions that African societies have themselves developed and utilized in resolving conflicts and maintaining peaceful co-existence. We aim to understand how this existing body of indigenous knowledge and institutions—which we term "African Potentials"—might be most effectively employed in settling conflicts, bringing about reconciliation, and healing post-conflict societies in today's Africa.

In this project, we deal with different types of conflict in Africa, from large-scale civil war situations to small-scale "troubles" in everyday life in small localities. African Potentials, some of which may be called "indigenous" or "traditional," include: informal mechanisms to avoid conflict, prevent aggression and promote toleration of others; voluntary negotiations to attain harmonious co-existence; local dispute-settlement systems, such as village and community courts; community-based NGOs; and various grassroots peace initiatives.

We focus on informal, rather than formal, judicial mechanisms. This emphasis does not mean that our research project rejects outright the validity of "modern" systems or romanticizes "traditional" practices but, rather, that we acknowledge the hitherto underrated value of African Potentials in considerations of conflict resolution.

These African Potentials have long been generated through encounters and clashes with European and Arabic Islamic societies, and continue to undergo constant transformation, a process we term “Interface Functions.” As we identify and evaluate African Potentials, we will also explore how they are articulated through external factors through Interface Functions.

This volume is the product of an international symposium titled, “African Potentials 2013,” held on October 5–6, 2013 in Kyoto, Japan. A total of 16 papers were presented at this symposium, including a keynote speech. Thirteen poster presentations were also presented by young researchers. I gratefully acknowledge the highly valuable contributions of the participants of this symposium. For details of the symposium program, please visit the above-mentioned website.

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